

***The Tempest* on the Screen of the Eighties**

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Abstract

*The assumption of my article follows Anthony R. Guleratne's claim that the Shakespearean movie is influenced by, but especially influences, the development of cinema: its genres and its forms. Well-known adaptations of *The Tempest* on the screen of the eighties are considered here as cases in point. While the American Mazursky's movie is faithful to Hollywood conventions, Jarman's and Greenaway's adaptations contribute to the vanguard auteur trends of the European movies of the eighties and plunge Shakespeare's text into a passionate debate, mainly within the fields of Film Studies and Adaptation Studies, on the relationship between the screen and the theatre, and the screen and the other media (intermediality).*

*Keywords: *The Tempest*, Shakespeare movie, the eighties, Hollywood, British auteur cinema, intermediality*

1. The wonder of *The Tempest*. Adaptation as a cultural process

Derek Jarman's 1979 *Tempest* and Peter Greenaway's 1991 *Prospero's Books* position themselves neatly at either end of the eighties, a *fin-de-siècle* decade crucial for the new world order (or we might say loss of order). The years of Reaganomics and of Mrs Thatcher's regime foreshadow the fall of the Berlin Wall, the decline of the Soviet Union and the reconfiguration of the European Warsaw Pact countries. The end of the post-war 'balance' between opposite ideological systems was to mark the unhindered triumphant affirmation of a world market economy based on and hastened by the new information and communication technologies, in particular the world wide web. The eighties witnessed a more and more tumultuous *sea-change* which was to plunge the planet into the future.

One of the reasons why Shakespeare's last play was so often translated onto the screen during that decade is that *The Tempest* is associated with a paradigm of motion and transformation. The British film adaptations of *The Tempest* by Jarman and Greenaway, on the

one hand, and the American *Tempest* by Paul Mazursky (1982), on the other, testify – this is the contention of this article – how far apart the answers of the European cinema and the Hollywood movies of the eighties were with regard to that change (Guneratne).

Until the eighties British cinema had not enjoyed a great reputation. François Truffaut had despisingly qualified the British as “notoriously unvisual, unartistic, and uncinematic” (Wollen 36). Britain’s isolationism had prevailed both in neoromantic post-war movies which (as in the case of Lawrence Olivier’s *Henry V*) tended to relieve the country after the sufferings of the war, or in the local realism of the film adaptations of the theatrical works of the Angry Young Men. Except for the short avant-garde experience of the *Close Up Circle* in the 30s, British cinema had eschewed the European New Wave (started in France), centred on the role of the *auteur* and on the primacy of the image over the written word.

In the 80s, though, a significant number of filmmakers – Jarman, Greenaway, Terry Gilliam, Stephen Frears and Hanif Kureishi among others – gave rise to a British New Wave. The rebirth of a British visual culture finally placed Britain in the mainstream of the *engagé* European cinema. But the primary source of this rebirth was not just the influence of the European *maestri* (Pasolini and Eisenstein for Jarman, Bergman for Greenaway); it was also anticipated by the success of British pop art, which combined an interest in popular consumer culture with the avant-garde tradition. Pop art entered British culture in 1956 with the exhibition *This is Tomorrow*, surprisingly introduced by an explicit reference to *The Tempest*: at the entrance, in fact, a giant Robbie the Robot, a character from the American sci-fi adaptation of Shakespeare’s play – Fred M. Wilcox’s *Forbidden Planet* (1956) – welcomed the visitors (Wollen). This reference to *The Tempest* almost at the origins of the British New Wave (Cartelli and Rowe) is, I maintain, more than accidental. First of all, Hollywood will keep privileging sci-fi adaptations of *The Tempest*, with cult movies such as *The Lawnmower* (Cavecchi and Vallorani), but, more significantly, what looks like an insignificant detail may suggest that *The Tempest* has played a necessary rather than accidental role in the development of British cinema. The choice of that text by two leading filmmakers of the British New Wave did not mean just relying on a written theatrical text, but recognizing a cultural paradigm of the Elizabethan stage which, with its practices and politics of representation and communication, had given origin to modernity. Orson Welles’ famous aphorism, that Shakespeare wrote for the cinema without knowing it, is more than just a joke. *The Tempest*, among Shakespeare’s plays, is, in fact, the most spectacular and the most metatheatrical: the wonder of the play is the illusionistic and manipulative power of the scientific artist, which is also the enchantment of the cinema. Paradoxically, in the end, the movie adaptations of *The Tempest* in the eighties made, as we will see, the so called uncinematic British cinema aware that its culture was founded on the most radical visual tradition.

2. Visual culture and Brave New World

In the process of its interpretations and adaptations¹, the ‘newness’ (‘O brave *new* world, That has such people in ’t!, V, I, 183–4, emphasis mine) inscribed in *The Tempest* has produced two main different, though not exclusive, perspectives on what is meant by modernity and its foundations in the early modern age (Albanese). One is a geopolitical notion of modernity, privileged by radical postcolonial and historicist readings: the discovery of

America – the New World – starts reshaping a world where a Europe of conflicting nation-states establishes its hegemonic dominion over the rest of the globe. The other identifies modernity with the instauration of the New Science, whose metaphor in *The Tempest* is Prospero's 'so potent Art' (V, I, 50), the power of his magic. In this case modernity has, in some ways, more temporal than spatial connotations: the manipulative power over nature of the modern 'studious artizan'² – the Prosperos, the Leonardos, the Galileos – steers humankind towards an irreversible and infinite process of tempestuous change whose ultimate outcome is our post-modern condition where the boundaries between mind and nature, human and artificial, real and virtual, medium and message are more and more rapidly on the verge of merging (Schiavone).

Both Derek Jarman's and Peter Greenaway's movies feature Prospero's science/magic at their centres. Greenaway explicitly admits that the technologies with which he so enthusiastically experiments in his electronic *Last Tempest* are the legacy of the seventeenth-century scientific revolution. Jarman thought Shakespeare familiar with the occult philosophy of Agrippa, John Dee, Giordano Bruno: "Ten years of reading in these forgotten writers together with a study of Jung [...] proved vital in my approach both to *Jubilee* and *The Tempest* (Jarman 190). In a 1982 interview, he admitted "the masque, that's what I love, and the magic", but when David Bowie once called him "a black magician", he protested: "the film is the magic, the dark art, not its maker" (Walker 230).

"The masque, that's what I love": not only Jarman's *Tempest*, but also *Prospero's Books* are masques. Both film directors chose exclusively this metadramatic and illusionistic genre to re-present Shakespeare's play for a number of reasons: they intended to preserve the festive atmosphere of fun and entertainment of the celebrative occasion for which the play was written (as everybody knows: the Protestant wedding of James I's daughter, Elizabeth, with the Palatinate Elector), and they also must have thought of themselves as the heirs in the movies of the well-known dispute between Jonson and Jones – the first to adopt and elaborate masques in England – over the reciprocal roles of the word, with its appeal to thought, and of the visual, the technologically elaborated setting, able – as it was – to fascinate the eye. "The settings of Shakespeare films always clash with the language: spirit turn to icy matter and falls like hail," Jarman states, "For the *Tempest* we needed an island of the mind, that opened mysteriously like Chinese boxes: an abstract landscape so that the delicate description in the poetry full of sound and sweet airs, would not be destroyed by any Martini lagoons" (184).

But the aesthetic emphasis the two British filmmakers give to images and innovative technologies of representation is not in contrast with their radical adaptations of the Shakespearean play, which both turn out to be, though in different ways, firm and savage critiques of the Thatcher regime.

3. The three movies

The platitudes of Mazursky's New York bourgeois comedy contrast sharply with Jarman's punk camp and Greenaway's electronic-oriented adaptations, making the similarities of the two British movies much more visible than their too often acknowledged antithesis.

Mazursky's domestic drama is an exemplary lesson in Hollywood disengagement: it is the stale contemporary case of the psychological breakdown of Prospero/Phillip (John

Cassavetes), a rich and successful New York architect, who finds a refuge from his mid-life crisis and conjugal dissatisfaction on a Greek island. There he lives an Arcadian life with his impatient teenage daughter, Miranda, his divorced mistress Aretha (Susan Sarandon), who resents Phillip's never-explained choice of celibacy, and Kalibanos, a local goatherd, who unsuccessfully tries to seduce Miranda, unexpectedly enticing her by his Sony TV. Phillip's 'enemies' (his wife, Antonia, an actress, and her lover, Alonso, played by Vittorio Gassman, an unscrupulous real estate entrepreneur), sailing on a luxurious yacht together with Alonzo's teenage son Freddy, and various members of Alonzo's entourage, including two buffoons, Trinc and Sebastian, caught by a tempest, accidentally shipwreck on Phillip's island. Here, in the end, Miranda and Freddy fall in love without Phillip's intervention, and the previous married couple seems to get together again before going back to their old lives in New York – which does not seem to suggest a Brave New World at all.

The Shakespearean relation between the Old and the New World is, in a way, reconverted: America seems, in this case, the point of departure, while a Greek island of the old (actually ancient) world becomes the destination. But Mazursky's odyssey is neither a journey for discovering new lands nor a classical *nostos*. Prospero/Phillip moves in a world where the only possible journey is the globalized movement of mass tourism. The Greek island is, in fact, a natural oasis and an Arcadian dream only in the self-deceiving imagination of the 'innocent' American: "Nature says the truth, why doesn't man?", Phillip declares. On the contrary, Greek islands are already caught in the web of mass tourism and communication, as Caliban's TV testifies. In Mazursky, the Renaissance Magus is reduced to an impotent escapist New Yorker.³ Phillip/Prospero's position is best represented by the opening scene, where the slow landing on the island is prepared by a long shot of a perfectly calm Mediterranean: the omission of Shakespeare's *Tempest* incipit – the storm – clearly metaphorizes the disengagement of the average American of the eighties who does not get involved and does not take sides. That position is largely reflected and encouraged by Hollywood. Mazursky's loose and contemporary adaptation, in fact, follows on the whole the Hollywood linear pattern of narration which supports confidence in progress and faith in ultimate ends (either metaphysical or human), and the notion of a stable and fixed heterosexual identity based on gender opposition. That pattern of representation creates the observer's passive gaze which – according to Laura Mulvey's lesson – ratifies gender hierarchy. The American domestic adaptation is, in fact, concerned primarily with recovering the stability of the heterosexual married couple.

Opposite concerns hold the centre of Jarman's and Greenaway's *Tempests*: their discontinuous and fragmented narrations break with the constitutive elements of Hollywood cinema to convey their radical political and aesthetic positions.

"[Jarman's] *Tempest*" – Paola Colaiacomo dryly points out – "is northern, anticlassical, anti-Roman and anti-Greek" (149, my translation). "I sailed as far away from tropical realism as possible" (184), the film maker himself acknowledges. The film is set, in fact, in the northern part of Warwickshire in the old aristocratic mansion of Stoneleigh Abbey; this choice reflects Jarman's main preoccupation with the contemporary condition of England at the dawn of the Thatcher Era when the optimism of the sixties was rapidly changing into the bleak despair of the punk generation. "What was basically changed for everybody is that the expectation, the belief that everything is getting better, has given way to the knowledge that everything is getting worse", George Melly bluntly claimed in the *Evening*

Standard, 18 October 1976. This proves true only if *Tempest* is considered in close association with Jarman's previous movie *Jubilee*, 1977. The two films form a diptych: the first a utopic, the second a dystopic adaptation of the Shakespearean text. *Jubilee* – written on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the start of Elizabeth II's reign – features an Ariel who, conjured up by the magician John Dee, will show Elizabeth I 'the shadow of this time'. The bleak representation of a contemporary corrupted London ravaged by a self-referential, violent young generation with no faith and 'no future' is, in this way, presented as the outcome of the premises and of the promises of the Elizabethan age, especially challenging the modern idea that history is a teleological narrative of progress. (The same actors shift roles in the two films.) To this sombre vision of the outward world in *Jubilee*, Jarman's *Tempest* opposes a warm internal setting. Stoneleigh Abbey was for Jarman a particularly suitable setting to connect with the Elizabethan age because at its entrance a real portrait of Elizabeth, James I's daughter, was hanging on the wall.

The setting was a crucial element for Jarman as a film maker. "The settings of Shakespeare films always clash with the language: spirit turns to icy matter and falls like hail" (184), Jarman claimed. Jarman's *Tempest* is a highly poetic work which succeeds in creatively and harmoniously combining



Shakespeare's words with bodies moving in enchantingly designed settings. The film maker builds the set through a series of *tableaux vivants* or moving pictures, which is pure cinema. His shooting technique is almost amateurish, and this is what most distinguishes his filmography from Greenaway's. "The film is constructed extremely simply with masters, mid-shots, and close-ups. The camera hardly ever goes on a wander. This is deliberate, as I have noticed that if one deals with unconventional subject-matter, experimental camera work can push a film over into incoherence" (Jarman 194).

The shipwreck in Jarman is presented as Prospero's dream. The filmmaker shot the storm in externals in the fashion of a documentary movie and gave it an oneiric dimension through the use of blue filters. The same colour pervades the external spaces of the island where Prospero's enemies move as if in a submarine dimension which hinders their movements and understandings. So, the tempest in Jarman's case is an internal dimension which is then

projected onto the outside. The breath of the dreamer combined with electronic sounds is its soundtrack. In this way, Prospero becomes at the same time agent, spectator and victim of the storm. The dreaming magician's words, 'we split, we split' may allude both to the cry of the shipwrecked and to Prospero's nervous breakdown.

Jarman openly welcomes the Shakespearean theme of forgiveness: "'the rarer action is in virtue, than in vengeance'. The concept of forgiveness in *The Tempest* attracted me; it's [...] almost absent in our world. To know who your enemies are, but to accept them for what they are [...] is something we sorely need. After the chill wind that blew through *Jubilee* came the warmth that invaded *The Tempest*" (Jarman 202). This declaration would be enough to deny the frequent, and sometimes moralistic, definition of Prospero as a sadistic tyrant. But when Prospero brutally stamps on Caliban's hands (to take the most often-quoted example), his action may be read more as a parodic sign of a weak magician than of a brutal master. In the film, on the whole, the prevailing mood is the festive, joyous and playful atmosphere of a masque, 'the sense of fun' of a group of actors/friends were having, playing and working together echoing what should have been the enthusiasm of an Elizabethan company of players. That is what gives the film his special camp flavour and his avant-garde homosexual radicalism.

The actors/characters wear costumes which refer them to different periods of time: a young Prospero, in Robespierre-like clothes, recalls the French Revolution; Miranda – the popular punk singer Toyah Willcox – wears punk dreadlocks, but also, at the wedding, a nineteenth century lady's dress; the time-weary Ariel is in a contemporary worker's white overall, the sailors are homoerotic mariners who wear real uniforms of the British Navy. Past and present, high and low merge in the enchanting settings where a Venetian eighteenth-century fireplace burns in a room full of hay and logs to chop. The discontinuous narration is paralleled by the representation of identities that are discontinuous and uncertain about what time, or even what sex or what generation, they belong to. The audience's gaze too is split: Ferdinand's body which, Venus-like, rises naked and blue-filtered from the waves of a cold North Sea, is the sexualized object of desire of the film. The spectator's eye is contradictorily directed both towards Ferdinand's male body and to Prospero's controlling point of view on Miranda. David Hawkes' synthesizing remarks may, at this point, be entirely agreed with:

Jarman's treatment of *The Tempest* (1979) exemplifies his view of the connections between the early modern theatre and the postmodern cinema. By drawing out those aspects of the play – its homoeroticism, its overall concern with sexual dynamics and power relations, and its juxtaposition of narrative with spectacle – which are also pertinent concerns of the cinema, Jarman affirms a kinship between his own work and the early modern theatre, and thus distances the audience from the conventions of narrative cinema. (Hawkes 107)

The final wedding masque is a true camp coup-de-theatre: in the presence of all the characters in a banqueting hall the crew of the sailors – mechanically, but also tenderly – perform a kind of Russian dance in a ring-a-ring-o-roses, when the famous blues singer, Elizabeth Welch, playing the wedding goddess in a saffron dress, erupts onto the scene under a shower of tinsel petals performing a memorable interpretation of 'Stormy Weather'. Her

caressing voice and her soft gestures help establish an aura of final reconciliation and reparation, a feeling of a recovery of a lost sense of community. But this feeling of a conquered Utopia does not lack irony. The song is, after all, a smart parody of the tempest: through Elizabeth Welch's extraordinarily sweet smiles, the song keeps repeating that 'it rains all the time'. The final masque roused the audience's enthusiasm at the premiere of the film at the Edinburgh Festival (August 14, 1979): it is not by chance that the movie enjoyed success in Europe, but it proved a failure in America. In an interview almost at the end of his life Jarman explained that *The Tempest* is too wild a text for the American taste.

The film closes round in a circle: as in the beginning Prospero's eyes are closed, his face is calm while whispering perhaps Shakespeare's most celebrated lines:

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits, and
Are melted into air, into thin air:
and, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
And, this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on; and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep. (IV, I, 148–157)⁴

Jarman prefers 'sleep' to 'free' (which ends Shakespeare's epilogue) as the final word of his *Tempest*; in so doing, he gives to its ending a centripetal energy, an inward and backward circular movement which once again challenges the 'progresses' of consumer cinema.

To the centripetal thrust of Jarman's movie, Peter Greenaway's *Prospero's Books* opposes a strongly centrifugal energy. The two *auteurs*, both educated at art academies and both painters, share an aesthetic fascination with visual arts. If in Jarman's *Tempest* the narrative developed in a discontinuous series of *tableaux vivants*, *Prospero's Books* is an outburst and infinite proliferation of phantasmagorical images. But in Greenaway, words, oral and written, feature on the same footing as images: the twenty-four books (*The Tempest* being one of them) hold the centre of the film. They are the texts with which Gonzalo 'had furnished' Prospero when, chased by his dukedom, he, together with his daughter, were left adrift.

Knowing I loved my books, he furnished me
From mine own library with volumes that
I prize above my dukedom (I, ii, 166–168)

These lines – either voiced by *the* Shakespearean actor, John Gielgud, or written on the screen, or on pages in a precious seventeenth century calligraphy, or as words overlapping other images – keep haunting the film. The film maker explicitly makes this point: "[...] a project that deliberately emphasizes and celebrates the text as text, as the master material on which all the magic, illusion and deception of the play is based. Words making text, and

text making pages, and pages making books from which knowledge is fabricated in pictorial form – these are the persistently forefronted characteristics” (Greenaway 9).

In his movie Greenaway establishes a centripetal and centrifugal relationship with the Shakespearean text. On the one hand, we see Prospero/Gielgud/Shakespeare, sitting in his cell – Antonello da Messina’s Saint Jerome’s study – engaged as an author in writing *The Tempest*. Immediately after writing, he reads the lines aloud. The lines give origin to the performance of the play where Prospero figures as an actor. In this case, Greenaway’s adaptation sounds almost like a theatrical kind of Shakespearean movie. On the other hand, *The Tempest*, together with the other books, explodes in an unrestrainable flux of images, rich in cultural and iconographic associations, identifiable as the archive of European Renaissance knowledge. All of them – objects, architectures, spirits, characters of the play – form a continuous stream which moves in the labyrinth spaces of Michelangelo’s Laurentian library which Prospero has reshaped as his ‘island’. The images are presented in layers of frames, in frames within frames (suggesting the Shakespearean practice of *the play within the play*), written over or written about. Such a quantity of images justifies Greenaway’s detractors, who accuse him of formal bulimia. The spectator, in this adaptation, is in fact faced not just with a discontinuous narration, but he is plunged into an almost infinite stream of associations and combinations where he/she is free to surf. In Greenaway’s hands Shakespeare’s text changes into a hypertext.

But Greenaway is more than a vacuous and narcissistic formalist. The filmmaker, the twentieth century Prospero, creator and manipulator of forms and meanings, recognizes anxiously that he occupies a threshold in a tempestuous process of change, which started with the Gutenberg revolution in Shakespeare’s times and led to the contemporary electronic technologies of communication and reproduction (Donaldson). In his *Last Tempest*, in fact, Greenaway starts eagerly and anxiously experimenting with new forms of technological manipulation of images: the paintbox and infography.



From this perspective, if the written text is presented as being that upon which everything depends, it is, at the same time, very far from being a fixed and stable originator of signs and meanings meant by an author. If the 24 books give Prospero, the seventeenth-century magician/scientist, the knowledge and the power to raise the tempest, they too are presented as involved, transformed, even torn by and drowned by it.⁵ At the end, Prospero sensationally throws the books into the channel of the Laurentian library where only the Shakespearean Folio, with the ‘last tempest’, will be

rescued by Caliban. It might mean the last rescue. Greenaway’s adaptation, rather than celebrating the books, announces their end at the threshold of a technological revolution which will especially concern the systems of representation, consumption and conservation of the text.

In the cultural process of reception and adaptation, *The Tempest* seems, we may conclude, to occupy a particular position in early modernity as well as in our contemporary age. It points both to an ending and to a transformation configuring itself as a paradigm of metamorphosis. In the giant Robbie the Robot (an echo of the Ariel of Fred M. Wilcox's *Tempest – Forbidden Planet*, 1956), Shakespeare's play announces the postwar movie revolutions: it lends itself both to Hollywood metaphors and to the magical and technological recreations of two of the most 'excessive' and still unsurpassed British auteurs of the eighties.

Notes

¹ What is meant by adaptation is all the acts of manipulation of the text in time (Cartelli and Burt).

² John Milton in *Paradise Lost* qualifies Galileo in this way.

³ The review of the movie in *The New York Times* was not indulgent (Vincent Canby, "'Tempest' opens with Nod to Shakespeare", August 13, 1982): "It's even more depressing to suspect that the film maker sees the Prosperos of our time as being nothing much more than overachieving, middle-class neurotics. It would have been better if Mr Mazursky and Leon Capetanos, who collaborated with him on the screenplay, had kept the source of their inspiration to themselves and written a comedy to stand on its own."

⁴ All the quotations from *The Tempest* are in *The Arden Shakespeare* (Frank Kermode ed.), London and New York: Routledge, 1994.

⁵ *The Book of Water*, which is the first to appear on the screen, is animated; its pages are strongly shaken by winds and showers, on its soaked pages images of storms and shipwrecks overlap with images of the shipwrecked enemies of Prospero.

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